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Citation for published version:

Joseph, JE 2011, '"The unilingual republic of the world": Reactions to the 1872 proposal to make English the national language of Japan', *Revista Argentina de Historiografia Linguistica (Rahl)*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 53-65. <[http://www.rahl.com.ar/Revistas/1%20-%202011/joseph-RAHL-\(1\)2011.pdf](http://www.rahl.com.ar/Revistas/1%20-%202011/joseph-RAHL-(1)2011.pdf)>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Revista Argentina de Historiografia Linguistica (Rahl)

Publisher Rights Statement:

Published Open Access in Revista Argentina de Historiografia Linguistica (2011) 3, 1, p. 53-65. Originally published online: <http://www.rahl.com.ar/Revistas/1%20-%202011/joseph-RAHL-%281%292011.pdf>

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“The Unilingual Republic of the World”. Reactions to the 1872 Proposal to Make English the National Language of Japan

“La república monolingüe del mundo”: respuestas a la propuesta de 1872 de transformar el inglés en la lengua nacional de Japón

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Abstract

In 1872, Mori Arinori, the newly-appointed Japanese ambassador to Washington, wrote to the linguist William Dwight Whitney concerning Mori's proposal to make English the national language of Japan, replacing Japanese. Whitney's response welcomed the idea of teaching English throughout Japan but explained why, from a linguist's point of view, Japanese neither could nor should be replaced. He was also unreceptive to Mori's suggestions for regularising English, levelling out strong past-tense verb forms and etymological spellings. Mori nevertheless had his proposal published in American newspapers, where it received widespread attention, including a mention in President Grant's Second Inaugural Address.

Key words: English language, Japanese language, universal language, national language.

Resumen

En 1872, Mori Arinori, flamante embajador de Japón en Washington, escribió al lingüista William Dwight Whitney en relación con la propuesta del propio Mori de transformar el inglés en la lengua nacional de Japón, en reemplazo del japonés. La respuesta de Whitney fue que, si bien le parecía una buena idea que se enseñara inglés en Japón, consideraba que, desde el punto de vista lingüístico, el japonés no podía ni debía ser reemplazado. Tampoco le entusiasmaron las sugerencias de Mori de estandarizar el inglés regularizando las formas morfológicas fuertes de pasado en los verbos y las marcas etimológicas en la ortografía. Pese a las objeciones de Whitney, Mori publicó su propuesta en la prensa norteamericana, donde recibió amplia cobertura y generó reacciones favorables, incluida una mención en el segundo discurso de investidura del presidente Grant.

Palabras clave: inglés, japonés, lenguaje universal, lengua nacional, idioma nacional.

1. Grant's 1873 address

On the 4th of March, 1873, President Ulysses S. Grant said in his second Inaugural Address:

I do not share in the apprehension held by many as to the danger of governments becoming weakened and destroyed by reason of their extension of territory. Commerce, education, and rapid transit of thought and matter by telegraph and steam have changed all this. Rather do I believe that our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required.

Grant did not even need to name the ‘one language’ the Great Maker was preparing the world to speak. With the imperial expansionist Disraeli in office as British Prime Minister in 1868 and again from 1874-1880, this was to be a period of widespread belief in the destiny of

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the English-speaking peoples to rule the nations. Then as now, new technological developments, including in communications (the telegraph) were seen as the key to the manifest destiny of English being realised.

Grant's invocation of God and of the end of armies and navies contains an echo of Micah 4:3, "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more". But the part about "speaking one language" may have a more specific source.

2. The attribution by Coates Kinney (1826–1904)

A few months after Grant's speech, Coates Kinney, a lawyer, poet, language professor and future State Senator and Poet Laureate of Ohio, wrote:

Will there ever be a universal language? We have the authority of a President's message for hoping there may. Mr. Grant looks for the universal language to come in with the universal republic. And to the magnanimous American patriot so much of the official ideal as contemplates a United States of Earth does not seem at all utopian. [...] But the practicability of a universal language will not be so readily admitted. We may bring hundreds of diverse nations, but how bring thousands of diverse tongues, into *E pluribus unum*?

Mr. Arinori Mori, Japanese Chargé d'Affaires near the American government, has suggested a solution of this problem. His suggestion is in the form of a letter, dated in June of last year, and printed in the newspapers. It is not improbable that this letter, falling under the President's eye, may have contributed its half toward inspiring his stereoscopic prevision of the universal and unilingual republic of the world. (Kinney 1873: 188)

Although Mori Arinori's link to Grant's statement is presented as simply a surmisal, it is worth noting that Kinney was Secretary of the Ohio delegation to the Republican convention that had nominated Grant for the presidency in 1868 (Wilson & Fiske eds. 1887-9). But this slight connection to the President was not enough for him to have been aware, apparently, that Mori Arinori was by all accounts on quite intimate terms with Grant.

3. Mori Arinori (1847–1889)

Mori Arinori is one of the more colourful and controversial figures in modern Japanese history.¹ In 1867-68 the Tokugawa Shogunate, which had ruled Japan in an inward-looking, traditionalist way since 1603, fell as a result of political pressures, and sovereignty was restored to the Emperor Meiji (1852–1912), who had ascended to the throne in 1867 at the age of 15. In fact he did not wield much personal power. Control of government passed from one oligarchy, the Shogunate, to another, the Daimyo, which consisted of the most powerful men from the military, political and economic sectors, and as devoted to pushing modernisation and Westernisation as the Shoguns had been to resisting them. Mori, born to the samurai class of semi-autonomous Satsuma, was in the vanguard of these changes. In 1865, at the age of 17 he was part of a Satsuma mission to Europe, where he remained for two years, followed by a third year in America, before returning home in 1868, in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, to take up a junior appointment in the foreign ministry.

In October 1870 the Japanese government decided to establish its first diplomatic posts abroad, and Mori, aged 23, was put in charge of the legation in Washington, D.C. The appointment of another very young man as *chargé d'affaires* in London was taken as an

¹ The definitive English-language biography of Mori is Hall (1973). A more recent book-length account of his career in English is Swale (2000). Van Sant (2003) includes a summary of his life and career.

affront by the British government, which kept him at arm's length; but Mori's reception in Washington following his arrival there in early 1871 was altogether different. He quickly gained the ear of prominent men, including the Secretary of State, Hamilton Fish (1808–1893), and the Secretary (i.e., director) of the Smithsonian Institution, Joseph Henry (1797–1878). Hall (1973) has shown how Fish took direct personal charge of the young man, helping him to understand the nature of his diplomatic role and to navigate the shark-infested waters of Washington politics. Henry served as his guide and protector in the intellectual, cultural and educational world, and among other things was responsible for recommending that he employ as his secretary Charles Lanman (1819–1895), who would end up taking down and sometimes ghostwriting, co-authoring or authoring — sometimes in Mori's name and sometimes in his own — the English versions of the proposals and reports that would bring Mori to the attention of the world.²

The most attention of all went to the letter alluded to by Coates Kinney, which was addressed by Mori to none other than William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), whose reputation as the leading American linguist of his time owed a considerable amount to a series of six lectures “On the Principles of Linguistic Science” he had delivered to the Smithsonian Institution in March 1864, which he had then expanded to a twelve-lecture series delivered to the Lowell Institute in Boston in December 1864 and January 1865, and published in 1867 as *Language and the Study of Language*. Joseph Henry had been in charge of the Smithsonian at the time of those lectures, and it is probably at his suggestion that Mori directed his proposal to Whitney.

4. Arinori's letter to Whitney

Mori's autograph letter to Whitney in the Yale University Library is dated 21 May 1872, and was sent with a covering letter from Joseph Henry dated 22 May. I quote here from the version published on the front page of the Sedalia, Missouri *Daily Democrat* on 13 January 1873.

DEAR SIR: The fact that a high rank as a philologist and linguist is awarded you by your distinguished co-laborers in the field of science and letters, has induced me to request, most respectfully, your opinion on a project I have under contemplation connected with the introduction of the English language into the Japanese Empire, which I have the honor to represent in the United States.

The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of that Empire, and too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language, the idea prevails among many of our best educated men and most profound thinkers, that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt some copious, expansible and expanding European language, print our laws and transact all public business in it, as soon as possible, and have it taught in our schools as the future language of the country, to the gradual exclusion of our present languages, spoken and written.

It may be well to state, in this connection, that the written language now in use in Japan has little or no relation to the spoken language, but is mainly hieroglyphic — a modification or corruption of the Chinese.

Four separate problems have here been bundled together by Mori: a perception of Spoken Japanese as impoverished compared to the European languages; a perception that phonetic

² See Lanman (1872); Mori (1871), (1872), (1873). More information on Lanman can be found in two biographies of Umeko Tsuda (1865–1929), the great pioneer of university education for women in Japan (Furuki 1991, Rose 1992). Mori had arranged for a group of talented Japanese students to come to America with the Iwakura mission in 1872 and to stay and study there. Tsuda, at age 6 the youngest of the group, was placed with Lanman and his wife Adeline (1824–1914), and the childless couple effectively adopted her.

writing would be better than the complex Japanese mixture of kanji and kana; the fact that Japanese was not an international language; and the fact that Written Japanese is not really Japanese at all, but a relic (and a corrupted relic at that) of Chinese cultural imperialism. I give them in the order in which one might expect that they genuinely appeared to Whitney to be problems. In his response he clearly takes the point about the writing system being a foreign imposition. That Japanese is not an international language is not a point of contention for him, but logically the possibility existed that it could become an international language. The superiority of a phonetic writing system is hardly something Whitney could have argued against, given his involvement in attempts to reformulate the writing of English on a more phonetic, less etymological basis, but he would also be aware that Japanese writing reflects the impact not only of Chinese but of Sanskrit, his own language of specialisation, and one might expect him to recognise it as having its own particular virtues. But the notion that Spoken Japanese is impoverished relative to the European languages is one he could not be expected to accept in the terms in which Mori puts it. Lacking vocabulary for certain modern Western inventions and concepts, yes, but that could be remedied through borrowing much more easily than through the sort of wholesale language shift envisioned by Mori.

We shall see that in fact Whitney's response was not quite what his general views of language might lead us to predict. But first, perhaps it is worth asking why Whitney should have taken this proposal seriously at all. Was it not perfectly mad to propose that English should or could be "the future of language of Japan, to the gradual exclusion of" Spoken and Written Japanese? Well, consider the changes to Japanese culture that were in fact introduced under the Meiji Restoration in 1872 alone: the feudal system was abolished; for the first time, anyone was permitted to buy or sell land; traditional dress was replaced with Western dress at court, and the traditional calendar was replaced with the Western calendar; Buddhist priests were permitted to marry. Mori Arinori, although young, idealistic and headstrong, held great sway with the Japanese government, or he would not have been put in charge of its first mission to the country it saw as the principal rising world power. And he had made a big impression, both personally and on behalf of his government, with some of Washington's most powerful men, including the Secretary of State and, quite possibly, the President, of which more anon.

Also, this was a time in which any social change, however radical, seemed possible. Universal, compulsory elementary and secondary education had recently been enacted into law in Britain and in most American states. In Europe, the vast new nations of Italy and Germany had replaced old feudal patchworks. With language too, this would be the decade of Volapük and Esperanto, invented idioms believed by many of their adherents to be superior to 'natural' languages, because constructed on scientific principles. And schemes were getting underway for the resuscitation of Ivrit, the Modern Hebrew language, in preparation for its eventual use in a dreamt-of Jewish homeland in Palestine — as mad an idea as any of the rest.

So Mori's basic proposition would not necessarily have struck reasonable people as a crackpot scheme, had it not been for the fillip he introduced next, which would change American and British perceptions of his proposal dramatically.

The English language would be our first choice for very many reasons; but there are certain obstacles, of an intensely practical character, which, if they cannot be removed, will make the introduction of that language into Japan exceedingly difficult — all but impossible. I allude, principally, to the absence of law, rule in order in its orthography, based either on etymology or on the sounds actually heard in words, and to the large number of irregular verbs, these latter being among the most frequent occurring words in the language, which makes the matter worse.

[...W]hile there would be little or no difficulty in introducing into the schools of the empire, and gradually into general use, a "simplified English," it would be, on the other hand, nearly useless to make an effort in that direction in behalf of the English language in its present form [...]. I propose to banish

from the English language, for the use of the Japanese nation, all or most of the exceptions which render English so difficult of acquisition, even by English-speaking people, and which discourage most foreigners who have the hardihood to attempt to master it from preserving [*sic*] to success.

I propose, for example, to substitute, as past tenses and past participles.

Think [<i>sic</i>] ³	for	thought	and	thought,
beared	for	bore	and	borne,
buyed	for	bought	and	bought,
comed	for	come [<i>sic</i>] ⁴	and	come,
speaked	for	spoke	and	spoken,
bited	for	bit	and	bitten,
teached	for	taught	and	taught,

and so on through the entire list of irregular verbs. I propose, in short, to make every verb in the English language “regular.”

Mori’s letter goes on to propose some further adjustments to English orthography: *fantom* (phantom), *invey* (inveigh), *receit* (receipt); and, on the model of the already adopted *plow* for plough, and *hiccup* for hiccough, he wants to “substitute ‘tho,’ ‘bow,’ for though and bough, and to make similar changes in all the words of the ‘ough’ class”. He defends these spelling changes more robustly than the morphological changes he proposes to the verb conjugations, which he puts forward as more or less obvious — apparently unaware that to linguists, and indeed to ordinary English speakers, the changes to the verb forms represent a much more profound level of language intervention.

Mori insists that this proposal to simplify English is not really his at all, but actually represents the views of most lexicographers and linguists, and that the whole world will be better off if it is adopted.

In spelling, I merely propose to complete what all English and American lexicographers, from and including Dr. Samuel Johnson down to the authors of the changes contained in Walker’s, Worcester’s and Webster’s dictionaries, all commenced, but timidly abandoned. [...] I have found that most of my views are also entertained by many eminent men who have made language a life study — some of them [...] even going so far as to say that not only English-speaking people, but the world at large, would be vastly benefitted by a thorough recast of English orthography, making the written language what it claims to be, phonetic, instead of hieroglyphic on a phonetic basis, which is what it now really is.

In insisting that his proposals for reforming English are widely held, Mori is no doubt trying to avoid seeming presumptuous, as any foreigner must seem who criticises a language to its native speakers. What Mori says here is more realistic than his earlier claim that the idea of replacing Japanese with a European language “prevails among many of our best educated men and most profound thinkers” — no evidence suggests that this was so. But to tell Whitney what eminent linguists think about anything linguistic was hugely presumptuous, as it was to present him with a fairly detailed scheme for his ‘approval’. Mori’s intent was to engage Whitney’s services to undertake the construction of the ‘simplified English’ he was projecting, yet it appears instead that he is lecturing to Whitney.

5. Whitney’s reply

As noted earlier, Mori’s letter came to Whitney with a covering letter from Joseph Henry, and it was to Henry that Whitney sent his reply, for forwarding to Mori. The reply is dated June 29, five weeks after the date of Mori’s letter, and in his confidential covering letter to Henry Whitney apologises for the delay, occasioned by a bout of diphtheria. Whitney’s reply

³ The form that should appear here, in line with those that follow, is *thinked*.

⁴ The form that should appear here is *came*.

would be published by Mori in *Education in Japan* (Mori 1873: 144-153), one of three books Charles Lanman produced as Mori's secretary. It appeared in January 1873, the same month in which Mori's original letter to Whitney was circulated to newspapers — possibly a move by Lanman to draw public interest to the book.

Whitney's letter begins by praising the "almost miraculous awakening of the people of Japan", and expressing his wish "that this noble people may be prudently and successfully guided in their upward career, and may rapidly attain a leading place among the cultured nations of the earth. To participate, even in the humblest way, in aiding their advancement, must be to any one a matter of both pride and satisfaction" (Whitney in Mori 1873: 144-145). He then proposes to "discuss a little the inducements that should lead to such a change of language as you contemplate on the part of the Japanese people. The fact of the inherent superiority of the English language to the Japanese or Chinese is not, of course, the only one to be considered" (145). This is a rather surprising statement from Whitney, but the rhetorical task at hand was a difficult one — he would not have wished to insult Mori by not even accepting the first premise of his proposal. Instead, he admits it, and then immediately denies that the inherent linguistic superiority of any particular dialect has actually ever counted for much in the history of languages. It is cultural, political and social superiority that count.

There have been many instances in the world of a people's abandoning its ancestral speech and adopting another; but, so far as I know, it has always been under the influence of the superiority in culture of the speakers of the other language — usually, indeed, aided also by political supremacy or social preponderance. The people in question has, as it were, by adoption of another language, joined itself on to another community, linking its cultural progress with that of the latter. So, I imagine, it would be with the Japanese: so far as they learned and used English, it would be because, mainly, of the eminence of the English-speaking races, in the present political and social history of the world, and in the career of modern civilization in literature, science, and art. By coming to speak English, they would, in a manner, make themselves a part of those races, having immediate access to all that was done by them; uniting, so far as civilization was concerned, the destinies of the two peoples. All this seems to me so much the more important advantage to be gained by the adoption of English in Japan, that I should be very loath to see any thing done which would interfere with its realization (145-146).

Again, this does not sound like the Whitney we know and love, and would expect to ask whether English was in fact the best choice among the European languages. He will in due course raise the questions we want him to raise about the practicality of abolishing Japanese and what would be lost if it succeeded. But his main thrust will be that Mori's proposal to teach all Japanese people English is an excellent one — so long as it is real, unsimplified English.

And I think that any alteration, in the process of adoption, of the essential structure of English, would constitute an interference. You cannot join the community of English speakers without frankly accepting English speech as they have made it, and now use it. All change of that speech, such as you propose, would be a barrier between the Japanese and English speaker of English, and would shut out the former from access to the English literature. The new English (such is the power of prejudice) would seem laughable and absurd to the speakers of the old, and those who used it would be visited with the contempt of the latter (146).

Such face-saving attempts as Whitney may have made at the start of the letter could have been motivated by what now follows: his out-and-out rejection of Mori's critique of English grammatical structure:

The irregularities of noun and verb inflection in English are indeed vexatious and a stumbling-block, yet it would seem to me that they must constitute but a *very* small part of the difficulty of learning the language: this must lie infinitely more in the mastery of English idiom — the use of the tenses, of the

articles, the various niceties of phraseology, and so on. These irregularities are far less numerous in English than in any other important modern language: and I should say that any community acquiring English had better take them as they are, and be thankful that the case is no worse. If one sets out to make English regular, there are the pronouns and the verb *to be* which call most of all for regulation; but to regulate them would be to give the whole language a new and strange aspect, offensive to those to whom it now belongs (146-147).

‘Offensive’ is a strong word for Whitney, and one wonders whether it may be his gentlemanly way of indicating indirectly to Mori that some offence has been taken. But he will put things back onto a less contentious footing by accepting Mori’s critique of English spelling.

[...] When it comes, however, to considering the orthography of English, I am forced to confess that you have reason entirely on your side in denouncing and rejecting it. No one, I believe, has spoken more strongly in condemnation of our modes of spelling than I have done, or pointed out more distinctly the obstacle which they put in the way of the acquisition and adoption of our language by foreigners and foreign communities (*see* my “Language and the Study of Language,” pp. 467-470). Our orthography has no advantages which in any manner or degree compensate for its innumerable inconveniences and difficulties. For the sake of the English and Americans, as well as the Japanese, it ought to be wholly reformed, and made truly phonetic (147-148).

Whitney recognises the great obstacle to this happening: because all of English literature is in traditional spelling, “no one who acquires English can afford to be ignorant of the customary guise in which English appears, however ungraceful and awkward it may be” (148). What he proposes, therefore, is for elementary education to have phonetically written English as its medium, with traditional orthography reserved for a later stage.

English may be put into a truly phonetic form in order to be first learned, primers and readers and a whole apparatus of school-books being prepared for the purpose; and then, when the difficulties of the language as a spoken one are mastered, or nearly so, the mode of writing may be taken up as an additional thing and learned. And to that end I should advise not simply the correcting of a part of the more obvious irregularities of orthography, but a reduction to an absolutely consistent phonetic form — one which should truly correspond with that which, as you suggest, may be adopted for the Japanese language itself (148-149).

This last point — the adoption of a phonetic writing system for the Japanese language itself — is what Whitney sees as “the first and most important of possible reforms” (149). He realises that other East Asian nations have found “great and insuperable obstacles” to introducing what he calls the “European mode of writing”, but hopes that the Japanese might show “their superior independence and freedom from prejudice, by making this reform” (*ibid.*).

You can judge, then, what satisfaction I have felt at finding how small a matter you consider it to be, and of what far higher and harder things you are thinking already. There can be no question that, whatever benefits Japan may have derived in the past from China, nothing of value can any longer be hoped for thence; that the pupils have outgrown their old teachers, and are ready to surpass them. Nor can it be doubted, I think, that the influence of the Chinese language on the Japanese has always been a harmful and a regrettable one, and that complete emancipation from it would be exceedingly advantageous to Japan. And it is, in great measure, as a furtherance to this emancipation that I desire to see Japanese written in European characters (149-150).

The perception that Japanese writing is not really Japanese, but a relic of Chinese cultural imperialism, made this the easiest change for Whitney to countenance. As he will now make clear, however, with spoken Japanese it is quite another matter.

But of the Japanese language itself I feel very unwilling to take a depreciatory view, or to accept any plan for the advancement of culture in Japan which does not include the ennobling and enriching of the native speech so that itself shall become a means of the increase of culture (150).

He implicitly accepts what Mori has said about the inadequacy and impoverishment of Japanese, but calls for it to be ennobled and enriched rather than abolished. Again, perhaps out of concern to save Mori's face, he proceeds to make arguments on behalf of Japanese that are based on Mori's own premises about the need for English.

Even with a fully-developed system of national instruction, it would take a very long time to teach a strange language to so large a part of the population as to raise the latter in general to a perceptibly higher level. If the masses are to be reached, it must be mainly through their own native speech. Those who have but little time to give to learning will learn little or nothing if they first have to acquire a new speech in which to learn it (*ibid.*).

And he adds another argument — that, because the learning of English would not take place uniformly across all of the population, the outcome would be a stratification into an élite and an ignorant class. (He assumes rightly that this is not what Mori would want, perhaps on the basis of the concern in Mori's own letter to simplify the learning of English for the benefit of all.)

To carry on the process in this way would be likely to result in the formation of a learned class, of limited numbers, in whose hands would be all the knowledge and culture, with a wholly ignorant lower class, separated from the other in nearly all its sympathies — such a state of things as prevailed in Europe in the middle ages, when Latin was the common speech of the learned, and the popular dialects were perfectly rude and poverty-stricken. Now, as you know, every European language is filled with (Greek and) Latin words, but in every country the speech of all classes is (with certain limitations) the same. It is the latter condition, rather than the former, that I should like to see the friends of Japan striving to secure for that country (150-151).

The statement that “in every country the speech of all classes is (with certain limitations) the same” does not sit well with what Whitney had written in *Language and the Study of Language*:

[W]hile we all speak the English language, the English of no two individuals among us is precisely the same: it is not the same in form; it is not the same in extent; it is not the same in meaning. [...] Although one language, it includes numerous varieties, of greatly differing kind and degree: individual varieties, class varieties, local varieties (Whitney 1867: 22; see Joseph 2002: 107).

Indeed, Whitney has here demonstrated that not even the English of *one* individual among us is precisely the same — “the same” does not mean the same in his letter as in the passage from his book. Be that as it may, he takes it as a given that English cannot become the vernacular of Japan, but must become a learned, ‘classical’ language if introduced there as Mori proposes to do; and to prevent social stratification from resulting, the Japanese language must be elaborated so that all of Japan's people can have access to Western learning.

Let the English language be studied as much as possible; let it take in Japan the place so long occupied by the Chinese; let it become the learned tongue, the classical language; let its treasures of expression be drawn upon as freely as circumstances shall admit and favor — but let the beneficial effect of all this be felt in the Japanese tongue itself; let the experiment be fairly and fully tried whether this is not capable of being raised and perfected, so as to be the worthy instrument of an advanced civilization. If the experiment fails at last, and the substitution which you propose has to be carried out, there will have been nothing lost, but much gained, in the mean time; the due and necessary preparation will have been

made, and the substitution will take place by a more organic process, from below, instead of being violently imposed from above (Whitney in Mori 1873: 151-152).

Again, ‘organic’ is a surprising word coming from Whitney, who always insisted on the purely conventional nature of language as against the organicist views of Max Müller. But ‘violent imposition from above’ is something we would expect him to reject, given his view that language is, and can only be, a democracy. The reply to Mori concludes with a statement of “the fundamental features of the plan which I should favor, as likely to lead to the best results” (152):

1. To accept the English language in its form as spoken and understood by those to whom it is native, for the standard and classical language of the new Japanese culture.
2. To make English more easy of acquisition by the preparation of text-books for learners in a purely and consistently phonetic orthography, one which will best teach its real or spoken form; adding then later, as a thing necessary for one who wishes to gain the full benefit of his knowledge of English, instruction in the usual orthography.
3. To write Japanese in a method agreeing with that adopted for English; and to open the language, as rapidly as circumstances allow, to enrichment from the stores of English (as well as of any other modern tongue with the conditions of the case shall suggest); with the idea that justice to the masses of the Japanese population requires their vernacular to be made for them a means of higher culture, that the substitution of any other for it must at the best be the work of generations, and that only the future can determine its practicability (with a heavy probability against it, as deduced from the history of languages in the world thus far) (152-153).

That last parenthesis is the one clear statement Whitney makes that Mori’s plan, insofar as it calls for English to become not just the standard but the *vernacular* language of Japan, is almost certainly unworkable.

Whitney has in fact rejected every one of Mori’s ideas. He would enrich rather than abolish Japanese, use phonetically written English merely as a stepping-stone to acquiring traditional spelling, and simply accept the irregularities of grammar, admitting no possibility of what today’s critical applied linguists call ‘resistance’, the process whereby second-language learners alter the structure of the language in such a way as to appropriate it and make it their own (see Canagarajah 1999, Pennycook 2001).

6. Mori’s further proposals and their fate

There was plainly no meeting of minds between the two men. Mori did not alter his proposals in the light of Whitney’s reply. At the end of his long introduction to *Education in Japan*, the book which includes Whitney’s reply as an Appendix, Mori would restate his original proposal in an even stronger form, adducing further arguments.

Without the aid of Chinese, our language has never been taught or used for any purpose of communication. This shows its poverty. The march of civilization in Japan has already reached the heart of the nation — the English language following it suppresses the use of both Chinese and Japanese. The commercial power of the English-speaking race which now rules the world drives our people into some knowledge of their commercial ways and habits. The absolute necessity of mastering the English language is thus forced upon us. It is a requisite of our independence in the community of nations. Under the circumstances, our meagre language, which can never be of any use outside of our islands, is doomed to yield to the domination of the English tongues, especially when the power of steam and electricity shall have pervaded the land. Our intelligent race, eager in the pursuit of knowledge, cannot depend upon a weak and uncertain medium of communication in its endeavor to grasp the principal truths from the precious treasury of Western science and art and religion. The laws of state can never be preserved in the language of Japan. All reasons suggest its disuse (Mori 1873: lvi).

The ‘commercial’ argument had not figured in Mori’s original proposal. Neither had “the power of steam and electricity” — and you may recall that the forces leading to a unilingual world according to President Grant in his inaugural address two months later were “Commerce, education, and rapid transit of thought and matter by telegraph and steam”. Moreover, Grant had already touched on these themes in a meeting with the Japanese mission in March, 1872 (see §8 below) — so it may be that Mori got the additional arguments from Grant, rather than the other way round.

Mori was recalled from his Washington post in the summer of 1873, in the wake of several calamitous disagreements with other Japanese government officials and requests by Mori to resign that were not granted. The furore over his proposal to abolish the Japanese language probably did not play a major part in this, though it did make him “the laughingstock of the foreign community in Tokyo and Yokohama”, to quote Hall (1973: 231), who bases his judgement on editorials printed in the *Japan Weekly Mail*. The reaction was enough for Mori to abandon the scheme; in Hall’s words, “the record we have shows no further defense or even mention, by Mori himself, of his [...] proposal subsequent to January 1873”. In a particularly cruel irony, the author of the Japanese Ministry of Education’s Report for 1873 which definitively quashed Mori’s proposals was not a Japanese, but an American, David R. Murray, whom Mori had been responsible for hiring. Mori’s 1873 book *Education in Japan* consisted mainly of responses to a form letter he had sent to prominent figures in American education (plus the odd crony of Charles Lanman’s) asking their views on what the essential features of American education were and how they could be most fruitfully transferred to Japan. The longest and most thoughtful response Mori received was in reply to the letter he had sent to the President of Rutgers College, who did not author the response himself, but asked a member of his faculty to do so. That man was David R. Murray, and on the basis of this impressive piece of work Mori recommended him to be hired as Japan’s superintendent of educational affairs and chief overseer of education (Hall 1973: 176).

Mori would spend several years in European diplomatic posts before making a dramatic political comeback as Education Minister in 1884. Then he would reform Japanese education on the model of the German system that so impressed him during his time there in the later 1870s. In the mid-20th century, he would take a great deal of blame for initiating the cultural alignment that would lead to the Axis accord and Japan’s war against what it saw as British and American imperialism in Asia, though recent decades would see a significant restoration of balance in assessing his reputation.

7. The last dim memories

By the 1880s, the episode was a dim memory. The following item appeared under “Timely Topics” in the Marion (Ohio) *Daily Star*, 11 March 1881, p. 3:

It is said that the Japanese minister, Mr. Mori, once seriously proposed to Professor Whitney, of Yale college, to construct a new language for Japan. Professor Whitney, who is the most learned scholar in linguistics in the country, is also known to be an advocate of the spelling reform. Mr. Mori proposed to him to form a compact vocabulary of a few thousand English words, divested of all absurdities of orthography and of all synonyms and superfluities of every sort. This language, if Professor Whitney would prepare it, the ambassador promised him should be adopted by his government and forced upon the Japanese people.

The “compact vocabulary [...] divested of [...] all synonyms and superfluities of every sort” — a figment of either popular legend or the author’s imagination — antedates by decades C. K. Ogden’s Basic English and George Orwell’s parody of it, Newspeak (see

Joseph 1999 and Joseph et al. 2001, Chap. 4). The one reference to Mori's scheme which I have found in the work of a linguist of the period is in a talk entitled "Aims and Traits of a World-Language" given by Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837–1899) to the Nineteenth Century Club in New York in 1888. In this extract, Brinton is arguing against schemes for a modified English as a universal language:

Prof. Whitney has well put the objections to any such scheme in his reply to the Japanese, Arinori Mori, who asked his advice on introducing some such modified speech into his country as a commercial language. The professor writes: "You cannot join the community of English speakers without frankly accepting English speech as they have made it, and now use it. [...]". Such is the opinion of the learned professor; and the condemnation he expresses of all schemes modifying English for the advantage of foreign nations applies with equal force to every other living tongue. Not one of them, either in its present form or in a modification, is suited to become a world-language. The phonetic, grammar and lexicographic difficulties are too great, even apart from the national prejudices sure to be excited by any selection which could be made.

Brinton cites Whitney's reply from its published version in Mori (1873). In saying that Mori wanted to bring English into Japan as a "commercial language", he is apparently reacting to the remark about 'commerce' inserted into Mori's introduction to that book. English would in fact come to Japan principally as a commercial language; and it is quite striking that no commercial consideration actually figured in Mori's original proposal. His mind was on higher things.

On 12 January 1889, the *Japan Weekly Mail*, reporting on a recent speech by Mori, noted with irony that "he does not intend to carry into effect his supposed hobby of rendering English the national language of Japan". As Hall (1973: 232n.) comments, "The *Mail* continued to gnaw a very, very old bone". Less than a month later, on 11 February, Mori Arinori was assassinated by a university student irate over his plans to increase tuition fees and an ill-judged speech in which he placed the blame for the burning of a dormitory on the students and their careless use of oil (Hall 1973: 3). In the days that followed, Mori was transfigured into a symbol of Japan's rush into Westernisation, and his assassin's grave became a place of pilgrimage. Since then, his role in modern Japanese history has been repeatedly reinterpreted, and remains highly controversial.

8. Mori and Grant

So how likely is it that Coates Kinney was right about the remarks on language in Grant's Second Inaugural Address having been inspired by Mori Arinori? Quite likely, on the balance of the evidence. Hall (1973) contains anecdotal reports of a friendship between Grant and Mori but treats them correctly as unsubstantiated. We do know from newspaper accounts, however, that the two men were together both formally and socially, starting with the reception Grant held for the Iwakura Mission on 4 March 1872. The next day's report in the *New-York Times* (p.1) includes Grant's formal remarks, in which he states his belief that "the wealth, the power and the happiness of a people are advanced by their encouragement of trade and commercial intercourse with other powers", and, among other things, "by increased facilities of frequent and rapid communication between different parts of the country" — a foreshadowing of his invocation of "Commerce, education, and rapid transit of thought and matter by telegraph and steam" in his Second Inaugural Address, delivered a year later to the day. We know too that Mori was extremely close to Grant's Secretary of State, who fully appreciated Japan's, and therefore Mori's, strategic importance for the United States; and it is unlikely that Grant would not have been apprised of Mori's scheme to replace Japanese with English, given the amount of publicity it received just two months before the Inaugural

Address. What is more, it is well attested in contemporary documents that when Grant toured Japan in 1879, Mori acted as his personal guide (Hall 1973: 281, 322), lending credence to there having been a reasonably close relationship between them during Mori's time in Washington.

9. International after-effects

Not surprisingly, Grant's vision of the world becoming "one nation, speaking one language" did not set well in Europe. The Mexico City newspaper *The Two Republics* reported on the front page of its edition of 5 April 1873:

Berlin, 11. — Several leading German news-papers this morning attack that portion of President Grant's Inaugural Address in which he speaks of the progress of Republicanism, and the growing tendency among other civilized nations toward that form of government. They denounce these remarks of the President of the United States as an insult to a monarchical State.

Remember that the monarchical State of Germany was barely two years old at the time, and had come about through a series of events that are held by historians such as Eric Hobsbawm to have spawned modern nationalism as we would come to experience it in the 20th century (see Hobsbawm 1990; Joseph 2004a, Chap. 4). From the European perspective, Grant's vision could not have been more false — except of course that nationalism also found its equal and opposite extreme reaction in the internationalism represented by Marxism and, on the linguistic side, the international language movements. The most famous such language was developed precisely in the 1870s, by Ludwik Lazarus Zamenhof (1859–1917) while still a Gymnasium student in Warsaw. On a later pamphlet he used the pseudonym "Dr Esperanto" — Dr Hopeful, which then somehow stuck as the name of the language (see Guérard 1922: 108). And on the night of 31 March 1879 there appeared to Father Johann Martin Schleyer (1831–1912) in Constanz, lying sleepless in his bed, the outline of Volapük, 'World Speak'. This was the first really widely successful modern artificial language, thriving from about 1885 to 1890, when interest in it, and indeed in any international language, suddenly waned. Then in 1898 such interest exploded again, this time with Esperanto as the beneficiary.

Joseph (2004b) cites evidence suggesting that the 1898 explosion was connected to the outcome of the Spanish-American War, in which the United States suddenly became a colonial-imperial power by inheriting Spain's possessions in the Americas and the Pacific. At that point it really did begin to look as though the English language might be 'manifestly destined' to become the *de facto* international language. The devotion of hundreds of thousands of people to promoting Esperanto as the alternative cannot be attributed to a desire to combat linguistic homogenisation, but rather to anxiety over what looked like imminent English linguistic monopoly. For the first explosion of interest a decade earlier, though, I suspect the cause is to be sought in the great complex of hopes and fears surrounding the new conception of nationalism in Europe; in the American perspective that the world was becoming one and that this was a good thing; and maybe even in a subliminal memory that when a figure in the Japanese government had once proposed making English the national language of Japan, the great American linguist he consulted was mainly concerned that they should accept it without resistance.

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